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ABSTRACT

A study examined evidence that first graders are able to analyze and respond to picture books. The study resulted from the collaboration of an eighth-grade class and a first-grade class. The eighth graders were given the task of writing, illustrating, and reading a picture book for the first graders. The first-grade class was randomly divided into five groups of six. Subjects used a story web to identify and respond to the four story elements: setting, characters, problem, and solution. Results indicated that first graders pay attention to detail and are capable of identifying elements in analyzing stories. Findings revealed that they can respond to picture books and give valid reasons why they like or dislike a book. (Contains three references, a story web, a sample response chart, and quotations from first-graders.) (Author/CR)

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The Study of First Graders Ability to Respond to and Analyze Picture Books

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Abstract

This research shows evidence that first graders are able to analyze and respond to picture books. The study resulted from the collaboration of an eighth grade class and a first grade class. The eighth graders were given the task of writing a picture book for the first graders. The first graders identified and responded to these picture books. The first graders responses show that they pay attention to detail in analyzing stories. Included in this article is the story web and a sample response chart used by the first graders, as well as quotations from their responses.

Introduction

Children are naturally curious. They ask questions, experiment, explore, and seek out answers to their world. Many picture books written for young children are inspired by children's curiosity (Pierce and Short, 1995). A picture book, by definition, is a book in which illustrations and text are essential to the story (Galda and Short, 1993). Pictures and print together create a unified text.

The understandings we have of children's responses to picture books are fragmented and unclear. A substantial amount of the research into children's responses to picture books has been conducted for commercial uses to provide book publishers and purchasers with information regarding children's preferences for book illustrations (Kiefer, 1983).

We know young children can analyze and respond to picture books in a variety of ways. The purpose of this project was to determine if first graders can analyze a single episode picture book written by middle level students in terms of characters, setting, problem, and solution. It will also explore whether these first graders can provide suggestions that might be of use to young adolescent writers in their future endeavors.

Background

The first grade class at Johnson Elementary School had already had the opportunity to listen to stories written, illustrated, and read by eighth graders from a nearby middle school. After the middlers left Johnson School the first grade students had a discussion about which books they liked and why. They also talked about lessons each book taught and gave reasons as to why they agreed with the lesson.

This first grade class has also had many experiences with commercial children's picture books. After listening to picture books read by their teacher, the students used a story web to analyze the book. The four elements of setting, characters, problem, and solution were used for analysis. For example, The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carl is a book that these students have analyzed. They decided that the setting was outside, the character was the caterpillar, the problem was that he had a stomachache from eating too much, and the solution was eating through a green leaf.

Another book they analyzed is Ira Sleeps Over by Bernard Waber. The first grade students determined that the setting was Ira's house and Reggie's house. The characters were Ira, his Mom, Dad, sister, and Reggie. The problem was that Ira could not decide if he should take his teddy bear

to Reggie's house to spend the night. Ira solves his problem when he goes home to get his teddy bear after seeing that Reggie too has a bear. In a class response chart, each student also decided if he or she liked, thought okay, or disliked each of the stories. Every time a decision was made, a reason was given to support the response.

Procedure

To take their learning one step further, these six and seven year olds were given the opportunity to judge the writing abilities of young adolescent authors. Eighth graders from Leland Middle School were asked to write and illustrate a single episode picture book using a choice of genres. They were informed that their audience was to be first graders and that the books were to include the four elements of setting, character, problem, and solution.

The first grade class was randomly placed into five groups of six. (There were five books written by eighth graders and each group of children listened to a different book.) In order to provide the common element of consistency in the experience, the classroom teacher was the reader of each book. The children are accustomed to the teacher's voice, how she turns the pages, and the procedures that have been established for listening and discussing picture books. After the book was read, the

students completed a story web to identify the setting, characters, problem, and solution (See Figure 1). Then the children responded to the book they heard by associating the book with a smiling face, okay face, or a frowning face. A happy face was to indicate that the child considered the book "good," an okay face that the child thought the book "so-so," and a frowning face that the child did not enjoy the book. Each child gave an explanation as to why they chose a particular face for response by writing their response themselves or having it dictated to the teacher (See Figure 2).

Results and Discussion

My Star, a book of grief and hope, was read to the first group and all six first graders were able to identify the four elements of the story. This story takes place outside a girl's house in Alabama. Three out of the six first graders were able to identify specifically that the story's setting is Alabama. The other three wrote that the setting is outside. Although this is not a picture book typical of those usually viewed by these students, because of its sad tone, each student was able to recognize the problem (the girl's mother had died) and the solution (the girl talks to a certain star that she calls "Mom"). Four out of the six students responded with happy faces and gave reasons such as, "I liked it

Name_____ Date_____

(Figure 1)

Setting

Characters

Title _____

_____

Author _____

Problem

Solution

(Figure 2) Response Chart: Ira Sleeps Over

"I liked it because I sleep with a teddy bear too."

"I thought it was okay because I want to hear the end of the ghost story."

"I didn't like it because the ghost story was scary."

when she talked to the star." One child did not think that this was a good picture book "because it is sad." Another child thought the story was okay and wrote "I thought it was okay because Casey's mom died. The good part is Casey talks to her mom."

The teacher read Our Sun, a legend, to the second group. All six students correctly identified "outside" as the setting of the story and Tom as a character. Three of the students named the sun as being a character and four of the children correctly named God as a character even though there is no illustration of God. Each of the six students accurately identified the problem (the sun would not come out) and the solution (God sending seeds so the sun would shine). Three of the children responded to this book with a happy face and gave reasons like, "I like the pretty pictures" and "I like the coloring." The other three thought the book was "okay." One student wrote "There are supposed to be words on every page." This was a valid and particularly attentive response because there are two pages in the book where there are only illustrations and no words. This had been noted by the eighth grade teacher who wondered if the children would object. Another reason that the book received only an okay face was, "I think it should go on. I want it (the book) to show his (the sun's) face at the end." They recognized that the conclusion was

somewhat abrupt.

The next group, which had only five students, listened to The Mix-Up on Old McDonald's Farm, a retell of a familiar children's song. The farm was specified as the setting and the characters were correctly identified by each first grader as the farmer and animals. Each student stated that the problem was that the animals on the farm were not doing the specific things that animals of that type are supposed to do. They determined that the solution concerned the meteor. The teacher and the students looked up the word meteor in the dictionary, as they always do when they are not sure what a word means. Four of the first graders rated this book with a happy face and validated their responses with statements like, "Because all the animals were going crazy" and "It was funny." One student thought this book was okay because she didn't like the way all the animals were talking "a different way."

Group four listened to and analyzed the modern fable, Howard's Dilemma. Each first grader recognized the setting as the pond or outside. Four of the six students named the characters correctly as Howard, his mom, brothers, and sisters. The other two did not name the brothers and sisters as characters and the researcher believes this is because Howard and his mom were the main characters with the problem and solution

centered around them. The fact that Howard could not swim was identified as the problem by each student. The solution was not easy for the first graders to identify in this story. Some responses were that, "Mom helped him out," "a little tube," and "he learned how to swim." All of these responses are appropriate. Five children enjoyed this story with each of them giving the reason that "because at the end he learns how to swim." The sixth student thought it was okay because "his brothers were picking on him."

Finally, The Bear and the Bee was read to another group of six first graders. Each child correctly named the setting as the woods or the forest. Four of these students identified the characters as the bear and the bee. Two students were more specific and used the character's names, Billy and Bobby, in identifying the characters. Three of the six children stated that the problem was that the bear wanted the bee's honey. The other three had entirely different comments: "The bear and the bee started fighting," "The bee wasn't Billy's friend," and "The bee was tired of the bear eating his honey." Although the problem was not clearly identified, all six students agreed that the solution in this story is the bee gave the bear honey. Yet, this solution came about in a variety of ways: "The bee felt bad for the bear," "The bear started to cry," and

"They became friends."

Implications

Teachers need to be aware that children can analyze and respond to picture books. They can do this even when the story is not perfectly crafted. This analysis is certainly an aid to comprehension and should carry them forward into their own writing when retelling and summarizing stories. Using the story web technique allows for practice in comprehension skills and expansion of inference skills. For example, students can "read" a picture book through illustrations alone, even though the story may not be the one intended by the author. After such a "reading," students often draw conclusions about the feelings characters may be experiencing based on illustrations. Teachers can then have students check their inferences by reading the story to the children.

Conclusion

It is obvious that young children are capable of identifying elements of fiction from picture books. They also can respond to picture books and give valid reasons as to why they like or dislike a book. Through their responses, they are capable of helping authors edit their work. These young children's ideas and suggestions may be of use to a writer of any age who is developing a picture book.

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